



Wisconsin State Senate
John Lehman
Senator — 21st District

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Testimony of Senator John Lehman
Senate Bill 359
December 3, 2009

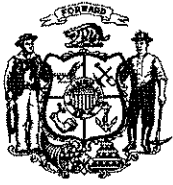
Senate Bill 359, with the substitute amendment, asks the Department of Public Instruction to amend the model academic standards for social studies to include teaching the role of the Hmong in fighting for the United States in the Vietnam War, the persecution of the Hmong by the Laotian government after the Vietnam War, and the reasons for the emigration of many Hmong to the United States. The goal of this legislation is to help schools create a better understanding of Wisconsin's diversity and promote an environment of tolerance in our state.

In our last census, Wisconsin ranked as the third state in the nation in Hmong population. Today, there are more than 50,000 Hmong living in Wisconsin. For more than 30 years Hmong communities in Wisconsin have been making life better for themselves and for all Wisconsinites. They have raised children, opened businesses, purchased homes and land, and expanded our workforce. They have successfully enriched our communities and our lives, and it is time to learn about their plight, and how they came to Wisconsin.

Immigrants come for various reasons, seeking sanctuary, freedom or just simply better opportunities. The Hmong sought refuge in our country because of the persecution they faced for becoming our allies during the Vietnam War. And, all too often in our country, new groups face discrimination. As a result, the Hmong community has experienced resistance from local citizens, facing isolation and even racially-driven crimes. People need to have tolerance and respect toward all cultures, and the first step toward understanding is education.

Without creating a mandate on school districts, we will help schools create a better understanding of this historic role and the great sacrifice made by the Hmong in support of America's military during the Vietnam War. I am hopeful that with a better understanding of the challenges the Hmong have faced in Laos and in Wisconsin, that people will have an increased appreciation of their culture and their path to our state.

Thank you.



WISCONSIN STATE ASSEMBLY

STATE REPRESENTATIVE
FREDERICK P. KESSLER

12TH DISTRICT

**Statement of State Representative Frederick P. Kessler
Senate Committee on Education
Wisconsin Capitol—Room 201 Southeast
Thursday, December 3, 2009**

**Senate Bill 359 - Directing school boards to provide instruction about the recent history of the
Hmong people.**

I want to thank the Chairman and the Committee for hearing this proposal, the Hmong Immigration Education Act. SB 359 and its companion AB 115 seek to educate our citizens on the history of the Hmong and how they came to migrate to the United States. I believe that such education is crucial to creating interracial and interethnic understanding and harmony. It is an unfortunate fact that racial and ethnic prejudice still exists and that there are many Wisconsinites who have a lot to learn about the Hmong who immigrated after the end of the Vietnam War.

During the Vietnam War the Hmong people who were living in Southeast Asia cooperated with the CIA to fight the Pathet Lao in Laos and disrupt trade along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. This assistance to the American government not only led to the death of thousands of Hmong but also to their exile from their native lands after the Pathet Lao took over Laos. The Hmong were compelled to migrate to Thailand in fear of genocide if they remained within Communist-controlled borders.

Due to the years of courageous fighting that the Hmong did on behalf of the American government, thousands of Hmong have been given refugee status in the United States since the late 1970's. These Hmong refugees have become an accomplished group of American citizens. In Wisconsin, their home ownership rates and education and income levels have all increased impressively in recent years.

Even though the Hmong have been very successful in their resettlement, many have experienced local prejudice. I believe the prejudice arises from unfair stereotypes, which in turn stem from a lack of knowledge about Hmong history and culture. Many Hmong have achieved citizenship and are American patriots – and I believe that they should be treated as such. This will not be the case until our youth understands the situation of the Hmong by learning their history in school.

To that end, the bill directs school boards to tell all students about the role that the Hmong played in helping the United States in the Vietnam War. This bill also directs schools to teach how Hmong involvement in the war led to their subsequent immigration to the United States. It does not mandate any specific curricula or programs, nor does it require a specific number of teaching hours. It simply aims to foster understanding and harmony among Wisconsin's diverse citizenship. I therefore urge the Committee to recommend passage of Senate Bill 359. I will now be happy to answer any questions that members may have.